

SYRIA: “Media Warfare” undermines UN Peace Mission

Annan: “We Need Eyes and Ears on the Ground”

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In his briefing to the UN Security Council on Tuesday April 24, Kofi Annan noted the important impact that the UN Observer Mission was having on the ground even though there had only been a few UN observers deployed thus far.(1)

He reported that there had been a marked decrease in the level of violence since the April 12 cease fire in Syria. “Without comprehensive monitoring of the situation,” he said, “it is difficult to assess the level of violence, but the available reports suggest that, taken as a whole the level of violence has decreased across the period since 12 April....” (Kofi Annan Briefing, Para 7)

He noted that the importance of having observers was not only to “see what is going on.” More significantly, he pointed out that “their presence has the potential to change the political dynamics.” (Kofi Annan Briefing, Para 21)

His goal is not to “freeze the situation” he explained, but to move toward what he calls an “enabling environment” that will facilitate “a genuine political process.”

Annan spoke to the crucial role that accurate information must play in helping to ease the crisis in Syria. “We continue to be hampered by the lack of verified information in assessing the situation,” he said. “We need eyes and ears on the ground,” he emphasized. “This will provide the incontrovertible basis the international community needs to act in an effective and unified manner, increasing the momentum for a cessation of violence to be implemented by all sides,” he explains. (Kofi Annan Briefing, Para 20)

Such a statement fails to acknowledge that there are those in what he calls the “international community” who are hostile to his peace mission. Instead they are working for regime change in Syria, a goal contrary to the UN charter. Accurate information is, in fact, as he emphasized, critical to the success of his mission in Syria.

A significant weakness of what he is doing appears to be the fact that he does not acknowledge the harmful effect that the unverified reporting of claims of the opposition has played in the Syrian crisis.

The January 2012 Report of the Arab League Observers Mission contained several references to the harmful role played by inaccurate media reports of what is happening in Syria. (2) In Section E of that Report “The Media”, there is a summary of this role. Quoting

this section:

“Since it began its work, the Mission has been the target of a vicious media campaign. Some media outlets have published unfounded statements, which they attributed to the Head of the Mission. They have also grossly exaggerated events, thereby distorting the truth.”(Report of Arab League Observer Mission, Para 68)

“Such contrived reports have helped to increase tensions among the Syrian people and undermined the observers’ work. Some media organizations were exploited in order to defame the Mission and its Head and cause the Mission to fail.” (Report of Arab League Observer Mission, Para 69)

In considering such past experience of an Observer Mission in Syria, it is to be expected that again there will be exaggerated media reports that will distort the truth. In his briefing to the Security Council, however, Annan refers to some unverified reports as having led him to be “particularly alarmed”. Though he admits that such reports have not been “confirmed”, he doesn’t warn that such reports must be suspect until after a verification process has occurred. (Kofi Annan Briefing, Para 9) Not surprisingly many western media reports about Annan’s briefing to the Security Council focused on Annan’s statement of alarm, rather than cautioning that such alarm is premature in the absence of verification.

While the Arab League Observer Mission was able to quickly put 166 monitors from 13 Arab countries and six relevant Arab organizations on the ground, the Security Council is being told that it will take up to a month to send 100 of the 300 UNSMIS observers to Syria. Such a slow pace for fulfilling the mandate provided by the Security Council in its approval of UNSMIS (S/2012/2043) is being criticized by some Security Council members. In his presentation to the Council, Annan asked that the “momentum generated” by the Council quickly approving the mandate for the Observer Mission not be lost.

Reports from on the ground are that there are eleven UN observers already in Syria, and that by the end of April the thirty observers for the initial contingent should be deployed. Despite such small numbers of observers, the early phase this represents in the mission, and the positive nature of Annan’s briefing to the Security Council, there are media reports quoting various sources that proclaim that the mission has failed. (3)

Such misleading media reports are to be expected as there is a media war against the sovereignty of Syria and in support of the armed insurgency.

One mechanism of this media warfare is constant reference to unverified reports from the opposition from such questionable sources as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights which is in the UK. Several exposures of this organization have been written showing that not only do two rival groups claim they are the legitimate representatives of this entity, but neither of the groups has a basis to verify the reports that are issued in its name.

Yet many media organizations around the world, especially in the West, continually refer to claims by this London based organization as the basis for the casualty figures they blame on the Syrian government. Similarly, more reliable information including names of victims among both government or civilian sectors caused by the armed insurgency are not reported in these mainstream media sources. Recently, a number of journalists have resigned from Aljazeera claiming that the political thrust of the news organization would not

allow these journalists to report on the evidence of violence by the armed insurgents.

In every war, media is a major weapon. Annan's six point plan is part of a peace mission. How the UN Observer Mission will respond to the media warfare against the Annan plan is a critical question that will determine how effectively UNSMIS can perform as a force in Syria.

Notes

1. Kofi Annan Briefing to the Security Council, 24 April 2012.

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0ByLPNZ-eSjJdbVRrTE4xb3F0RDQ/edit?pli=1>

2. Report of the Arab League Observer Mission to Syria, January 2012, S/2012/71

<http://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/219/03/doc/N1221903.DOC?OpenElement>

(The title of the UN document is "Letter dated 24 January 2012 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, Enclosure 4. League of Arab States Observer Mission to Syria 'Report of Head of the League of Arab States Observer Mission to Syria for the period from 24 December 2011 to 18 January 2012,p. 11-22'.")

Another copy of the Arab League Observer Report is online. The url is:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/s2012-71ArabLeagueObserverMission.pdf>

3. See for example:

Ariel Zirulnick, "Observers in Syria Having an Impact but only 11 on the Ground So Far", Christian Science Monitor, April 25, 2012

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2012/0425/Observers-in-Syria-having-an-impact-but-only-11-on-the-ground-so-far>

Ian Black, "Kofi Annan offers bleak progress report on Syria", The Guardian, April 25, 2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/25/kofi-annan-bleak-report-syria?newsfeed=true>

4. RT, "Russia questions credibility of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights", February 25, 2012

<http://rt.com/news/syrian-observatory-human-rights-reliability-223/>

RT, "Deaths in Syria: Counting them (politically) correctly", February 9, 2012

<http://rt.com/news/syria-death-count-political-875/>

"Al Jazeera reporter resigns over 'biased' Syria coverage"

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/al-jazeera-reporter-resigns-over-biased-syria-coverage>

A version of this article appears on the netizenblog at

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/04/26/kofi-annan-briefing/>

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